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THE MILL OR THE FARM?

BY A. J. MCKELWAY,

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Perhaps the photographs which I shall presently show you of the children at work in Southern mills, the general appearance and especially the size of the children, will be the best reply to the paper you have just heard from Mrs. Harriman. However, I wish to take direct issue with regard to several statements.

It is impossible for any one, however gifted, by making one or two brief tours through the Southern cotton mills to gain a correct impression. The National Child Labor Committee with its careful, systematic and photographic investigations, has had to contend with two types of tourists; on the one hand, those who wish to find a market in the magazines for sensational stories concerning the evils of child slavery and the cruelties practiced upon the children of the cotton mills; on the other hand, those especially interested in welfare work, who, therefore, naturally visit the few mills in which such work is being conducted, and, unintentionally absorbing the views of the manufacturers, end with what is practically a defense of child labor. I am so familiar with the views of some of these manufacturers that I might almost give the names of the gentlemen who have given Mrs. Harriman her impressions concerning the people of the South. However, I think some of them would say that she has gone too far in her description of the contrast between agricultural conditions and mill conditions in the South.

"Poor Whites"

The speaker's whole perspective is at fault. For example, she divides the whole white population of the South before the war into two classes, the rich slave owners and the poor whites, who are further described as "illiterate, immoral and indifferent." She says that this class of "poor whites" was increased in number by the families who had lost everything by the Civil War and were unable to work for a living, and that these "poor whites", after the war, moved away from the populous sections into the mountain districts,

where there were no schools, no churches and no railroads. This was a serious indictment of practically a whole people. Did any one ever know a society composed of several million white people of Anglo-Saxon stock sharply divided into two classes, the very rich and the very poor, the latter being illiterate, immoral and indifferent?

There were all classes of society represented among the slave owners themselves, as well as among the non-slave holders. It was only the lowest element among the white people to whom the slaves themselves felt superior that were called "poor white trash". The great mass of the Southern people did not own slaves.

The sons of the slave owners did not hesitate to enroll in the Confederate armies, but the non-slave-holding class made up the rank and file of those armies, whose prowess during four long years is the historic answer to the charge that they were illiterate, immoral and indifferent.

The speaker's theory of the settlement of the mountain regions of the South is unique. She says that the original "poor whites" of the South, recruited by the broken-spirited, following the results of the war, found that they could not make a living in the populous sections and moved to the mountains. This should have certainly populated the mountains, for it would have meant the emigration of at least five-sixths of the white people, who belonged to the non-slave-holding class. So far as my own memory and experience recall, we were all "poor whites" after the war. Those who were not were under suspicion of having sacrificed too little for the Southern cause.

Early Settlers

I was under the impression that the mountain regions had been settled before the Civil War, even before the Revolutionary War. I have a dim recollection that it was the mountain folk of the Watauga that won the battle at King's Mountain and saved the Revolutionary cause when it was at its lowest ebb. To say that there were no schools and no churches, even before the Civil War, in the mountain regions, is a palpable error. To imagine that in the Appalachian system, from northern Virginia to Alabama, there were only one- or two-room houses, with mud floors, is to display an ignorance as vast as the mountain region itself.

There has been so much talk about the superior conditions of

the people of the mills compared with their former miserable lot, that I wish to make this defense of the people of the rural regions here and now. The cotton mills are set forth in this paper as the savior of these people, religiously, educationally, and, according to Dr. Stiles, physically. It may be mentioned, in passing, that this is the last stand of the cotton manufacturers against our reform. First they said that child labor was a good thing in itself; then they shifted to the ground that it was a bad thing, but that there was very little of it left; being driven from that position by the overwhelming array of facts presented, they have said that at least the condition of the people was improved by their transportation from the farms to the mills.

Illiteracy

The trouble is that there were not enough mills for this supposed work of civilization. Mississippi has about twenty cotton mills, Louisiana, but three or four. According to this theory the white population of these two states must be in a deplorable condition indeed. Yet we find that the white illiteracy in Mississippi, for example, is much less than it is in the cotton mill states. Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee have a few cotton mills, but these could hardly have had any effect, even if they were the beneficent agency they are so often represented to be, in saving the white population of these states from their alleged degradation, illiteracy and immorality. As to the effectiveness of the cotton mills in checking illiteracy, it seems rather singular that the illiteracy of the children of the cotton mill families of North and South Carolina and Georgia is three to four times as great, according to the last census, as the illiteracy of the white children of these states at large.

Every student of Southern history after the war knows that the whole white population was impoverished; that our people had to begin at the bottom and build up their civilization anew. And there are some students of history who think that their success against the peculiar obstacles that confronted them is the proudest chapter in the history of the Anglo-Saxon race. To say that any large percentage of this population is immoral and indifferent, or degenerate, as Dr. Stiles would have us believe, is absurd on the face of it. And I beg leave to say to the cotton manufacturers, who are really responsible for the promulgation of such views as those just

expressed, that they are guilty of slandering their own people in these wholesale accusations, for the poor cause of excusing themselves for employing children. Even if there were any force in their contention that the people as a whole are better off in the mills than on the farms, that contention does not touch the heart of the question, which is: whether the children in the mills are better off when they are protected by law from premature toil, or are better off when the fullest exploitation of their labor is permitted. It is not whether the children are better off than they were, but whether they are as well off as we have a right to expect and demand now.

Nimble Fingers

The theory as to how the children happened to be employed in the cotton mills, namely, that the fingers of the adults were so stiffened and their hands so hardened by toil that they were unfit for work, ignores the whole history of the cotton-mill industry,—two hundred years of it in England and one hundred years of it in America. It was not an accident that the children were employed. There was a demand for their labor from the very nature of the industry. It was not that the adults of the family could not work; it was that the children could work profitably and, of course, at lower wages. As I have elsewhere pointed out, the Southern manufacturer simply copied the system he found in New England and bought machinery adapted to child labor just as the New England manufacturer had done when he copied the system and machinery of Old England.

Employing Sick Children

The argument in Dr. Stiles' contention that child labor itself is a blessing, in attracting people from the soil-polluted farms to the better sanitary conditions of the mills, is a fallacy on the face of it. If such a large percentage of the factory children are afflicted with hookworm, it is, in the first place, probable that the disease has been aggravated by the long hours of toil for the children in the mills; and, in the second place, it is certain that children whose systems have already been debilitated by such a disease should be prohibited by law from the known consequences of too early toil. That the mills can run with a fourteen-year-age limit has been amply proved

by the history of New England; that they can run at a profit is proved by the annual distribution of dividends in New England.

With regard to this whole question of welfare work, it should not be regarded as an atonement for the employment of children; in fact, it may be shown, logically, that the system of child labor compels the adoption of the welfare system through the lowering of the wage scale and the helplessness of the workers which makes them dependent upon the voluntary efforts of the employer to better their condition, instead of being in a position where they can demand a fair distribution of the rewards of industry themselves. After all, we must remember that the hospitals, schools, gymnasiums and churches of the few mills we have heard so much about are built by the dividends, sometimes unnaturally large, which have come to the cotton-mill owners through the system of cheap labor they have employed, and that, if there were a fairer ratio of dividends to wages, the people could do for themselves that which is now done for them by the mill owners out of the rewards of their industry.

I have lived in the mountains of North Carolina for the summer months for the past five years. I have seen some families that had returned from the mills and were glad to get back. I know that the sentiment throughout the mountain regions, among those who have remained, is that it is a calamity for a family to move to the mills.

I am not a physician and am not skilled in the diagnosis of parasitic diseases, but I believe it to be common sense that the natural vigor of the human system is the best protection against diseases of any kind. And I give it as my opinion that the most vigorous race of people in America to-day, judging by their appearance, is the race of mountaineers living in the mountains of North Carolina and I presume in the mountain regions of the other Southern States. While there are, of course, here and there isolated sections where school and church privileges are few, yet within the last two decades there have been left but few such places on the map. Nor are our tenant farmers of the lowlands a degraded class. A cause grows to be desperate, indeed, that must make its apology with what amounts to a wholesale slander of the great mass of white people in the South, indiscriminately dubbed "poor whites", whose former condition was so degraded that a removal to the cotton mills is a blessing. As you look at these photographs of the children

in the mills and remember that these children work for eleven hours a day in the South Carolina mills and for twelve hours a day in the North Carolina mills and the Georgia mills here shown, I think it will be still more difficult to understand how the change for these children from the work the child could do on the farm, in the open air, to work by day or night in the humid, heated, lint-filled atmosphere of the spinning mill, is a change for the better, so far as the child is concerned.